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MEMORANDUM

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TO: S/P - Mr. Rostow

FROM: Q/PM - Raymond L. Garthoff

SUBJECT: Reflections on the Confrontation over Cuba

The Soviets have doubtless had a number of motives in establishing missile bases in Cuba. They have probably been tempted by the first opportunity to establish a counterpart to American bases encircling the Soviet Union. There can be little doubt that they have recognized that such an action is provocative to Washington, though they may have underestimated the compulsion to react vigorously.

The Soviet leaders probably calculate that the new period of tension (which, incidentally, they had sought in advance to moderate by their relatively quiescent stand of late on Berlin, Laos, and the like) can be exploited to their advantage. While there are several ways in which the United States could have reacted, and may still react, each would offer certain opportunities for Soviet maneuver.

From a period of exuberant confidence following the first Soviet Sputnik and first ICBM test in late 1957, the Soviets have thrice marched up the hill on Berlin and down again. From a period of publicly anticipated and acknowledged Soviet superiority in over-all military power in 1960, the military balance has by late 1961 and since swung more and more against them, and above all this is publicly accepted. It may appear in Moscow that missile bases in Cuba represent both the first, and probably the last, opportunity to place a lever under the US positions of strength on the Eurasian periphery.

At the extreme, the United States might militarily neutralize Cuba, at a cost to the American posture of peace, but also at the price of impairing the image of the USSR as a global power. Since the United States has chosen to act in the first instance resolutely, but not drastically, both sides will have the opportunity of assessing world reactions to the limited measures undertaken.

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The chief Soviet "strategic" assets are: an intercontinental capability which works to restrain the United States from sharp escalation; a powerful nuclear missile force poised against Western Europe; a quantitative advantage in conventional strength in Europe, and especially on the access routes to Berlin; a highly vulnerable situation in Laos; and now, the missile bases in Cuba. "Factically", the Soviets have the advantages of: ability to match a selective blockade of Cuba by a comparable selective "filter" on Allied weapons allowed to go to Berlin; doubtless some sympathy for the view that "defensive" long-range missiles in Cuba are not essentially different from defensive long-range missiles in Turkey; the ability to trade off their Cuban bases for some inroads into the US overseas base system; and the "opportunity" to make the United States fire the first shot if they wish to precipitate an incident in the blockade.

The chief weaknesses in the Soviet position are: a basic military inferiority in the event of general war, compounded by Western alert and possible Western preemption in some cases; ineffective sea power either to challenge the American naval blockade, or to institute strictly reciprocal measures; and the inability to interpose their own power between that of the United States and Cuba at any acceptable risk.

These remarks are an incomplete draft of thoughts stemming from your request of this morning; being now fully engaged on more immediate aspects of the problem I am passing this on now without waiting for the chance to complete it, though I may return to it later.

Any comments would be appreciated.

cc: G - Mr. Johnson
 3/AL - Mr. Thompson
 G/PM - Mr. Kitchen
 IIR - Mr. Hilgman

G/PM:RLS:arhoff:pep

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Reclassified and verified Dec. 7, 1962